

Citation for published version:

Vince, R & Pedler, M 2018, 'Putting the contradictions back into leadership development', *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, vol. 39, no. 7, pp. 859-872. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-04-2018-0134>

DOI:

[10.1108/LODJ-04-2018-0134](https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-04-2018-0134)

Publication date:

2018

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

The final publication is available at Emerald via [10.1108/LODJ-04-2018-0134](https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-04-2018-0134)

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Putting the Contradictions Back into Leadership Development

Russ Vince and Mike Pedler

Abstract

Purpose: To outline an alternative view of leadership development that acknowledges the likelihood of unintended and contradictory outcomes in leadership work. Helping leaders to engage with contradictions is as important as developing their positive capabilities. A focus on the contradictions of leadership can help to address the emotional and political limitations that development programmes unwittingly impose on learning.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach: The paper discusses how leadership development currently falls short in helping people to lead in complex organizational environments. This argument is illustrated by examples taken from MBA teaching in a School of Management together with an analysis of contradictions in the National Health Service (NHS) Healthcare Leadership Model. A final section gives four examples of how to put the contradictions back into leadership development.

Findings: The paper does not seek to present empirical findings. The illustrations support an argument for changes in practice. Examples are provided of a different approach to leadership development.

Originality/ Value: The paper critiques approaches to leadership development on the grounds of its relentless positivity regarding leadership behaviour and that focuses primarily on the development of individuals. Attention is called to the contradictions inherent in leadership work which extend to the leadership development process itself. Once acknowledged, these contradictions offer important leadership learning opportunities for both individuals and organizations.

Introduction

Most leadership development is unfit for purpose. Leadership work is reliably subject to unpredictable and unforeseen outcomes, especially in environments characterized as VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous: Johnson 2009), so that development programmes which present leadership as a clear set of positive, individual skills and competencies are a poor preparation for these messy realities.

Ironically, it is the awareness of these VUCA environments that may underpin the valuation of leadership as a critical component in political, economic and business success. A manifestation of this faith in leadership as a solution to corporate challenges is the size of the global leadership development business, now valued at up to \$50 - 60 billion (Burgoyne 2004; Grint 2007; Day 2011)

We argue against leadership development that only emphasizes the positive, and we call attention to the contradictions inherent in leadership work. We argue that these extend to the leadership development process itself, and further, that once acknowledged, these contradictions offer opportunities for learning about leadership. Our practical purpose is to outline an alternative view of leadership development which acknowledges the likelihood of unintended and contradictory outcomes. We suggest an approach to leadership development that utilizes the contradictions that are embedded in organizational life, both as productive aspects of development and to show how development is avoided.

We begin by critiquing leadership development practice in the light of this thesis and pointing the way to a more fitting provision. The argument is developed using examples from MBA teaching experiences and a U.K. National Health Service (NHS) Healthcare model to explore how leadership learning can embrace *both* capability *and* contradiction. The final part of the paper proposes four ways to put the contradictions back into leadership development and thereby better prepare people for addressing complex challenges.

Problems and possibilities of leadership development

The suggestion that leadership development practice falls short in its responsibilities for preparing leaders for a complex world is not a new one. The limitations of development programs which assume that leadership is a straightforward business, built around successful practice, presented as unproblematic and assumed to be widely applicable, have been widely acknowledged. In his review of the literature, Mabey (2013: 4-5) concludes that the ‘overwhelming’ majority of accounts rest upon ‘functionalist and normative assumptions’ which presume that leaders and leadership can be defined and developed in the mutual interests of all concerned. Bolden et al (2016) suggest that our ability to think effectively about leadership has been undermined, because we treat this as a problem that can be broken down, analyzed and dealt with via models of behaviour and competence. Whilst a focus on problems has led to many technical breakthroughs, Revans (1982: 712) argues that leadership is not a technical puzzle because it is ‘charged with *unanswerable* questions as well as *unformulated* ones’. Heifetz (1994) and Grint (2005) define leadership work as concerned with the ‘adaptive’ and ‘wicked problems’, where leaders face issues which demand action but are rarely resolvable in any final way.

Nor are we the first to recognize the contradictions that are integral to leadership work. The paradoxical nature of leadership was highlighted in the early 1990's to explain why organizations had become so difficult to manage (Handy 1993. Hampden-Turner 1993). Paradoxes, these writers warned, appear as enigmas, as contradictions, as seemingly impossible or illogical situations where simple choices lead to unintended consequences and unforeseen pitfalls. Since then leadership paradoxes have been widely explored (Lewis 2000; Vince 2008; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010; Dotlich et al 2014; Obolensky 2014; Bolden et al 2016; Robertson & Bell 2017; Vince *et al.*, 2017).

So, what could be done differently in leadership development? Interesting possibilities emerge when the idea that programs largely fail to prepare leaders for the emotional and

political demands of their work, is coupled with the notion that contradictions are an inevitable aspect of leadership development itself.

Why does leadership development fall short... and how can it measure up?

There are several, inter-related answers to this question. In the first place, organizations are usually not very clear about why they do leadership development (Jackson & Parry 2008: 119). Additionally, most development is leader development, aimed at individuals and their skills, and reflects the enduring ‘allure of heroic leadership’ (Bolden et al. (2016: 33). By contrast, much leadership research suggest that distributed or collaborative approaches are more appropriate to complex and uncertain conditions (Heifetz 1994; Grint 2005). Another factor is the lack of evaluation studies and the generally under-researched nature of leadership development when compared with the long tradition of research on leadership itself (Day 2000; Burgoyne 2004; Day et al 2014).

A different explanation for leadership development programs being as they are, is that they have purposes beyond the straightforward education of people for leadership work. Whatever their design and contents, participants frequently observe that they value their experiences, citing increased confidence and enhanced feelings of self-worth. From another angle these unadvertised gains can be seen as the products of socialization processes and as reflecting the Business Schools' mission of "training future top managers to occupy conventional social roles" (Revans, 1982: 579). Critical theorists see this function of leadership development as ‘identity regulation’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) or ‘cultural doping’ (Raelin, 2008). Participants may detect these purposes and react in different ways. For example, in their discussion of two global leadership development programs, Gagnon & Collinson (2014) report participants becoming aware of attempts to create ‘idealized leader identity’ and resorting to both overt and disguised resistance. Some years ago, one of the authors worked on a BBC leadership development project which included a linguistic shift from ‘managers’ to ‘leaders’; to which one response was: ‘they want us to be leaders, so they can tell us what to do’.

Nevertheless, the opportunities for leadership development are likely to remain highly valued by the chosen, for whom the recognition and self-worth benefits may outweigh any inappropriateness of universal models or the need to resist undesirable shaping. In this way, those chosen for cultural assimilation collude in perpetuating development that ill prepares them for the acknowledged complexity of leadership work. From a strategic perspective this is an unhappy connivance: leadership development motivated by acts of faith or identity regulation is unlikely to help organizations or communities deal with their complex problems and risky opportunities. On the contrary, they risk misleading would-be leaders, diverting their energies into individual careers and away from the more collaborative efforts required in complex and uncertain situations.

Putting the contradictions back into leadership development

The above critique suggests some directions for thinking about how leadership development might be better fit for purpose. First, we know that actions in complex systems tends to produce unpredictable outcomes, partly because links between cause and effect are distant in time and space, and also because such systems are highly sensitive to some changes but very insensitive to others (Simpson *et al.*, 2000; Yeo, 2009).

Organizational sponsors should recognize that action on leadership development is similarly likely to lead to unimagined (and possibly unwanted) results. Like Revans' 'unanswerable questions', unimagined outcomes provide important clues about the underlying tensions in the organizational context.

Second, to complement individualistic notions of leader development, research findings support a shift of focus towards ways of working that provide insight and experience into distributed or collaborative approaches. Third, whilst acknowledging the inevitability of purposes beyond the straightforward education of people for leadership work, a more open stance towards attempts to control leader identity could promote public reflection about how power works in the organizational context. Unacknowledged efforts at shaping people and embedding existing power relations can significantly undermine

development, for example through the generation of negative feelings, cynicism and resistance.

Finally, because any leadership development opportunities tend to be personally valued by those chosen, there is the danger of misplaced confidence that will be short lived once real difficulties are met. Putting the contradictions and uncertainties of leadership work back into development programs and helping people to accept and work through the many different emotions they experience, will not be to the detriment of genuine confidence and competence, but will enhance it.

The contradictions of leadership

In this section, illustrations from MBA teaching and the NHS' Healthcare Leadership Model (NHS Leadership Academy 2013) are used to explore how learning about leadership can embrace *both* capability *and* contradiction.

(i) The MBA conundrum

Managers who come on MBA courses at Business and Management Schools bring with them an on-going tension integral in their managerial and leadership roles. They are expected to be 'good leaders' but are also aware that it is impossible to know with any certainty what this means in practice. Whether individuals are 'good' or not depends on many contextual factors, including how clear are the expectations about leadership in a given organization. Whilst poor leaders can indeed be poor leaders, it is common to find previously successful leaders failing badly in new posts. Whether they are victims of circumstances or the individual scapegoats for a wider pattern of poor leadership, failure may arise from a confusion of roles and responsibilities, from ambivalent relations with power and authority in a system, or from a cultural determination to avoid anxieties that may unsettle the status quo.

As teachers, we take great care to explain to MBA students that there is no single, consistent set of leadership skills, abilities, knowledge or competencies that can capture what leaders do. We tell them that leadership is as much collective as individual, is surrounded by complex emotions and politics, and that it is context specific. So, for example, a skill set applied by an individual with great success in one organization can be the very same that underpin this person's failure in another context. Yet, although they understand and accept that it is highly unlikely that any single set of leadership skills or capabilities yet devised will be able to explain what leaders do, MBA students will still want to be provided with the skills and knowledge 'to be a better leader'.

In teaching leadership, we are faced with a contradiction in the classroom that mirrors one in organizational life. Students want to be given something positive that helps them to become 'a better leader' and yet they cannot really learn about the messy realities if we give them what they want. To put it another way: the very act of prescribing a set of capabilities also limits the emergence of capability. Building positive skills, knowledge and capabilities needs to be set alongside teaching the emotional and political dynamics that get in the way of learning, which may otherwise render individuals incapable of action. How can we find a different approach to teaching and learning about leadership in ways that do justice to the emotional and political complexity of leadership in action?

What leaders do

As noted, the leadership literature focuses mainly on the individual leader and on positive prescriptions for behaviour and action. Leaders do positive things: they listen to us, they help us to make sense, they win resources, they articulate a vision. A review undertaken for the UK National College for Schools Leadership (NCSL, 2003) analyzed and encapsulated the contents of some 25 books and readings on leadership that leaders themselves would recommend, under the heading: 'What Leaders Read'. (All documents available from the NCSL web pages at: <http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/>). There are many ways to use this resource; we used it to summarize what leaders do into a single PowerPoint slide (see Figure 1), which illustrates the tendency to prescribe positive

behaviour. For the students' benefit, and to get the point across, we call this 'the Ultimate PowerPoint slide on Leadership'.

Figure 1: What Leaders Do

- Leaders help determine the meaning of events
- Leaders build agreement around objectives and strategies
- Leaders build task commitment and optimism
- Leaders develop mutual trust and co-operation
- Leaders strengthen collective identity
- Leaders organize and co-ordinate activities
- Leaders encourage and facilitate collective learning (i.e. shared experiences, the pooling of knowledge and skills)
- Leaders obtain the necessary resources and support
- Leaders develop and empower people
- Leaders promote social justice and ethical behaviour (rather than abusing the authority of their role).

Most books on leadership emphasize the positive, because they are concerned with promoting the 'best way', with what works ('best practice'), and with selling a model or approach. A less obvious aspect of this list is how it touches on a strong desire from students and practitioners for a PowerPoint slide that outlines what leaders really do. *The Ultimate PowerPoint Slide on Leadership* both represents and critiques the hope that such a slide - capturing the 'truth' about leadership - might exist. The over-focus on the individual and on being positive in a leadership role have a lot to answer for. It is the desire to be 'a better leader' that promotes and sustains the fantasy of a better self – one that entertains mostly what is positive about our leadership interactions and relations with others. Yet we can produce a very different picture of things that leaders do, which is equally recognizable, but which puts them in a much less favorable light (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: What Leaders (Also) Do

- Leaders control and/or undermine the meaning of events for personal or political reasons
- Leaders create conflicts around objectives and strategies
- Leaders get in the way of task commitment, their behaviour can foster cynicism and apathy
- Leaders are often not trusted or trusting
- Leaders weaken collective identity, they work and make decisions in isolation
- Leaders are disorganized and they fragment activities
- Leaders discourage and avoid sharing (because sharing is not always to their advantage)
- Leaders can't get hold of the resources they want and complain about the lack
- Leaders undermine and disempower people
- Leaders are dismissive of ethics and social justice and regularly abuse the authority of their role.

Figure 2 transforms Figure 1 into its opposite - a description of leaders' negative behaviour. Which of these is the most realistic and convincing picture of 'what leaders do' in practice? Figures 1 and 2 show why a relentless emphasis on the positive is not necessarily helpful in understanding leadership in practice: addressing the contradictions apparent here helps to shift the focus towards a concern with the emotional, relational and political processes that are generated around leadership actions (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2010). Instead of a focus on the individual leader and their abilities, this puts more emphasis on the collective work of experiencing, interpreting and acting on the contradictions generated by leadership actions within working environments understood as emotional and political as well as rational and practical.

Whilst contradictions like this may appear intuitively to get in the way of becoming 'better leaders' and 'better selves', it is important to recognise that Figures 1 and 2 *both* represent what leaders do all the time. Leaders can simultaneously want to empower people and to undermine them, and it is the tension between these desires that makes such

contradictions significant. Doing leadership is a practical activity, but it can also be emotional and political *inactivity*. This is why it is important to balance approaches to leadership that focus on individual authenticity and self-regulation, with approaches that place the emotional and political dynamics of leadership at their heart. Trying to become ‘a better leader’ through constructing a better self needs to be complemented by an understanding of the contradictory, self-defeating and self-limiting aspects of leadership roles and relations.

(ii) Capabilities and Contradictions in a Healthcare Leadership model

This point can be further illustrated by taking a leadership model which emphasizes individual capability and considering how it could be developed through the acknowledgement of contradiction. The Healthcare Leadership Model has been created:

“to help those who work in health and care to become better leaders. It is useful for everyone – whether you have formal leadership responsibility or not, if you work in a clinical or other service setting, and if you work with a team of five people or 5,000... It applies equally to the whole variety of roles and care settings that exist within health and care” (NHS Leadership Academy, 2013 p. 3).

The intended impact of the model in broader terms is an “increasingly positive experience of care and service” (p. 4). The model is built from nine leadership dimensions, the first of which, “inspiring shared purpose”, both informs and stems from the eight outer components. The model has been constructed from a robust and comprehensive process that includes: reviewing the relevant literature (Story and Holti, 2013), building a draft behavioural model, sampling of leadership behaviours (interviews), redrafting the model using evidence from the interviews, and testing it with the intended audience before finalising.

Leaving aside the contentious claim that there could be a single, generic model of leadership behaviour for such a complex context as the British NHS and Social Care

system, our interest here is the distinction it makes between good and bad leader behaviours, and with the determined emphasis on positive individual capabilities. Each of the nine leadership dimensions is presented with different grades of capability (essential, proficient, strong, and exemplary) posed as questions about personal behaviour, for example: “do I act as a role model for belief in and commitment to the service” (an ‘essential’ capability for inspiring shared purpose p. 5). Accompanying each dimension is a description of what it is, why it is important, and “what is it not”. This last category is of great interest because it describes unwanted leader behaviour. For example, “engaging the team” is described as “involving individuals and demonstrating that their contributions and ideas are valued...” (p. 10); and the behaviour that represents ‘what is it not?’ includes: “building plans without consultation, autocratic leadership, failing to value diversity, springing ideas onto others without discussion” (p. 10).

Putting together leader behaviours that are both desired and discouraged in the model helps to provide a picture of the contradictory nature of healthcare leadership. We suggested earlier that Figures 1 and 2 are *both* pictures of what leaders do all the time, and that placing them together shows the contradictions that can occur in the emotional, relational and political context of leadership. Situating positive and negative possibilities for leader behaviour side by side is important to show that these are not separate aspects but part of a whole set of leadership roles and relations. It follows that they should also be taken together in learning about leadership. Figure 3 (below) is an adaptation of the Healthcare Leadership model that depicts these twin aspects of leadership behaviour in healthcare:

Insert Figure 3 here

The core message of this paper is that learning about the potential contradictions of leadership work is as important as developing its positive capabilities. To focus only on the positive restricts the understanding of the emotions and power relations that infuse leadership in practice (Collinson, 2011; Vince and Mazen, 2014). For example, in Figure 3, the undesired behaviour ‘building plans without consultation’ (engaging the team),

may occur because of the attitudes of followers, or from ambivalences in the relationships between leaders and followers; or from contradictory expectations placed on leaders by others or indeed by themselves. Similarly, ‘failing to understand the impact of your own emotions or behaviour on colleagues’ (leading with care) must be so much an everyday experience in the NHS that it seems perverse not to help leaders learn about this *as well as* learning about ‘providing a caring, safe environment’. The emotional and political dynamics that surround leadership action (and inaction) in the NHS are an important, if poorly understood, element in the provision of care; and the same must be true of any entrenched relations of power and powerlessness present that may prevent a caring, safe environment from being possible.

In our experience, organizations are not overly rational environments. They are replete with emotions and politics that can make them feel uncertain and confusing places. A responsible provision for leadership development would ‘intentionally generate some degree of uncertainty and confusion... (for) creative tension’ (Lewis and Dehler, 2000, p. 710) and provide a space to learn about the emotions and politics that surround and infuse everyday leadership roles and relations.

The benefits of contradictions

One of the ways in which we can see the benefits of both positive and negative practices is in organizations that maintain seemingly incompatible or ‘dual’ strategies. The established view is that dual strategies are impossible to sustain because of their negative effects on organizational processes. Dual strategies are deliberately contradictory. For example, they seek to differentiate at the same time as standardize; to both centralize and decentralize innovation and change; and to both lead and follow in service development (Heracleous and Wirtz, 2014). Research in Singapore Airlines has discussed how they utilize paradoxical tensions in the organization. Their approach ‘simultaneously balances dual capabilities... that most other organizations would consider distinct or incompatible’ (Heracleous and Wirtz, 2014 p. 141).

Similarly, Smith, Lewis and Tushman (2016: 65) discuss how to foster ‘the unique aspects of competing constituencies and strategies while finding ways to unite them’ (Smith, Lewis and Tushman, 2016: 65). They provide an example of how this was achieved within W.L. Gore and Associates. ‘You need a different management structure for innovating than for managing the day-to-day business. The two activities require a different mind-set, different skills, a different focus, a different time frame, and different metrics. So, we establish different organizational structures to manage both, but also create clear linkages such that the teams value each other’s contributions to the whole’ (Terri Kelly, CEO of W.L. Gore & Associates, quoted in Smith, Lewis and Tushman, 2016: 66).

These organizations challenge the assumption that they require consistent structures that apply across the whole organization. They deliberately seek to exploit the value of practices that are expected to produce negative effects. In both these examples, contradictions have become an integral aspect of how the organization develops and thrives. We believe that a similar perspective can be applied to leadership development. We think that the main benefit of addressing contradictions and exposing leaders to both positive and negative practices is that organizations will be able to more effectively balance their development of personal practice (leader development) with the development of collective capability (leadership development). Deliberately engaging with both the positive and negative consequences of their practice helps leaders to see how being positive can have negative consequences, as well as the importance of seemingly negative practices for extending and improving leadership capability within the organization.

For example, silence is often considered to have negative consequences. However, leaders’ capacity to speak out effectively sits alongside their ability to exploit the possibilities of silence. As Blackman and Sadler-Smith (2009) point out: ‘any assumption that silence indicates that all is well is potentially dysfunctional for learning, since it may belie tensions, paradoxes, contradictions and constraints on voice’. The leader’s role is to consider whether silence in a group or team represents a problem of not knowing how; or

being unwilling to move forward; or whether silence is a necessary part of the process of finding out how to move forward. Silence is difficult to sustain in busy and task orientated organizations, and yet it may be an essential part of the emergence of new ideas and ways of working. Leaders' ability to know when and how to remain silent within their team is integral to ensuring other voices, and therefore to improving shared and collaborative forms of leadership.

More often than not we expect leaders to lead with their voice and not with their silence. Yet, at the same time, leaders' will speak out to cover their anxieties about not being seen to lead, their fears of conflict, or of losing control. Communication serves many purposes in organizations, it makes work possible and it undermines it. As leaders we have to be able to reflect on such insights in order to understand, for example, when our helpfulness is a hinderance, when our clarity confuses, and when our preferred actions unnecessarily dominate and stifle others. In the final part of this paper, we propose ways to approach leadership learning that acknowledge the emotional and political complexities of organizational life.

Fit-for-purpose leadership development

Following the critique made in the early part of this paper, any fit-for-purpose leadership development must offer participants opportunities to: consider how to deal with the unimagined outcomes of leadership acts; reflect on how power relationships impact on leadership outcomes; and learn how to engage in collaborative rather than heroic leadership.

We discuss below four examples of how to put the contradictions back into leadership development and prepare people for the realities of leadership work. These examples can only be briefly sketched here, and it is important to stress that, although they may look to be familiar methods, the difference is in how they are presented and informed by the mindset outlined in this paper, namely that leadership can have negative as well as positive outcomes, and that such work involves inherent contradictions.

Ideas to help leaders think out of the box

Recent theories concerning relational leadership and studies of emotionality, power relations and collective dynamics can be liberating in widening participants' views of how leadership works. Relational theories emphasize the experience of *doing* leadership as a practical activity and provide a basis for understanding how contradictions happen. A relational perspective shifts the focus away from the individual and towards the collective dynamic of leadership whereby “persons’ and their leadership are “*made in processes*” (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 655). In other words, leadership is generated in social dynamics where the interactions result in attempts both to control people and to change things (Cunliffe, 2009; Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2010). It is these simultaneous attempts to control and change that inevitably generate *contradictions* as part of the process.

The tensions between control and change also generate emotion for all concerned, which is frequently avoided and covered up (Vince and Saleem, 2004; Salecl, 2004). Covering up emotional and political tensions conceals the struggle of leading in complex situations and has the effect of encouraging instrumental and prescriptive behaviour on the part of leaders. In this way, the complex emotional dynamics of leadership are played down in favour of a set of positive capabilities, as for example, when leaders genuinely feel that they are empowering others whilst at the same time they are manipulating them. Over-emphasising the positive masks such contradictions and promotes the delusion where leaders do not see the potentially harmful consequences of their own helpfulness.

Leadership involves relations of power: “understanding leadership in relation to power and authority is paramount’ (Western 2008: 56). The use of power provokes *resistance*, which is also everywhere, as “ambivalence, resignation, toleration, theft, non-cooperation, sabotage, confrontation, collective action, formal complaints, legal action, or violence’ (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007: 1334). Leadership is also tied to action and takes shape through “leadership-in-action” (Kelly, 2008: 768), where “Those who aspire to lead must figure out what leadership is in the context of what they do and persuade themselves

and others that they are doing it" (Fairhurst, 2009: 1609). However, as well as action, leaders engage in the contradictory dynamic of *leadership inaction* where they make choices when it is emotionally and politically expedient not to act (Vince 2008). The political nature of organizations means that leadership-in-action *and* inaction run concurrently in leadership practice. Admitting such contradictions helps us to understand the complications of such work, when we feel for example, a desire both to empower and to undermine people (Kets de Vries, 2004).

Non-heroic case studies

We noted earlier that leadership research suggests that collaborative approaches might be best suited to complex, adaptive or 'wicked' problems. However, even when addressing such problems, leadership case studies tend to feature central characters (Heifetz 1994), thereby contributing to the enduring allure of heroic leadership. But case studies do not need single heroes and can reflect the collaboration of the many.

An example is the issue of fostering employee engagement (Vince & Pedler 2018), which is a key challenge for many organizations and their leaders. The Chartered Institute for Personnel & Development suggests four actions to bring this about: empowering employees to make decisions and shape their jobs; creating effective channels for employee voice; giving fair treatment and support for well-being; and communicating to inform employees in ways that reinforce purpose and vision (CIPD, 2017). In this case we propose four parallel dynamics which illuminate the contradictions inherent in employee engagement. Firstly, attempts to empower employees should be examined for any evidence that they are driven by defensiveness or a fear by leaders that their authority is being undermined. Secondly, encouraging people to have their voices heard should be done whilst considering the ways in which the organization currently places restrictions on speaking out: whilst individuals are encouraged to speak out, it is unrealistic to assume that it is always possible in organization life. Thirdly, "strong strategic narratives" (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) aimed at urging people to connect with organizational purposes and vision should also be understood as idealized stories aiming to encourage

compliance. Fourthly, attempts to promote fairness should be considered alongside any persistent inequalities, for example, in pay differentials between men and women in similar jobs.

Cases like this can enable people to reflect on the contradictions inherent in leading such initiatives and reveal the dangers of over-emphasizing the positives. By making explicit the possibilities and limitations of change in any given system, we argue that this can actually increase, rather than decrease, the potential for effective leadership action.

Public Reflection

Public reflection (Raelin, 2001) is based on peoples' willingness to speak out about their experience of an organization. This is often safer in a leadership development context than it is within the everyday politics of an organization. Public reflection seeks to create a community of inquiry. It is necessarily undertaken in the company of others and, consequently, creates different inter-personal and organizational dynamics of accountability, authority and learning (Raelin, 2001; Vince, 2002). Where public reflection is made possible, leadership actions, and the assumptions on which they are based, become more open to inspection and challenge. This can bring out strong emotional and political responses. Our view is that these responses, despite mobilizing fears about conflict, enable organizational members and participants within development programmes to comprehend the emotional and political context within which both their leadership and followership are done.

The extent to which actions and assumptions are opened to scrutiny depends on existing power relations in the organization and within learning environments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, attempts at public reflection can mobilize established powers against reflection. For example, reflecting publicly on the here-and-now dynamics of the management classroom generates both openness to and resistance to learning. Being aware of both engages people with their individual learning and with the organizational processes and dynamics that promote and prevent their learning (Vince, 2010).

Action learning

Action learning is the approach devised by Revans (1982) to help people learn how to solve problems, and in particular to address the "unanswerable" and "unformulated" challenges of leadership. In an ongoing process of action and reflection, taking the form of a series of face-to-face or virtual meetings over a period of months, people are encouraged to act on organizational challenges and learn from their experiences of doing so (Pedler, 2011). Critical action learning is a development especially suited to learning about the contradictions and paradoxes of leadership work, because it reveals how underlying emotions and power relations are part of both individual and organizational learning (Ram and Trehan, 2010; Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Trehan and Pedler, 2009; Trehan, 2011; Vince, 2004, 2008 and 2012). Action learning requires both commitment and courage, but it can generate insights into the defensive organizational dynamics that are mirrored in leaders' lived experience and help to bring about the new ways of working which are needed but often resisted.

Conclusion

This paper argues that leadership development should address the unpredictability of leadership work and acknowledge both capability and contradiction in order to correct the overemphasis on positive prescriptions. Leadership development can lead to unimagined and unwanted results, as well as to useful insights and skills. We argue that considering such contradictions brings insights into how organizational processes can silence people or encourage them to remain uninformed and detached rather than enthusiastically engaged with new knowledge and opportunities. We offer four examples of approaches to leadership development that align with the emotional, political and practical complexities of leadership in organizations. Contradictions are integral to organizations and to leadership, but they are commonly ignored. Bringing them into leadership development, will enhance and deepen our understanding of leadership in practice.

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Figure 3: Contradictions of Healthcare Leadership (developed from the Healthcare Leadership Model, NHS Leadership Academy, 2013, p. 5-13)

<i>Dimensions of leadership behaviour</i>	<i>One side of 'What is it?'</i>	<i>Another side of 'What is it?'</i>
Inspiring shared purpose	Valuing a service ethos; curious about how to improve services and patient care; behaving in a way that reflects the principles and values of the NHS.	Turning a blind eye; using values to push a personal or 'tribal' agenda; hiding behind values to avoid doing your best; self-righteousness; misplaced tenacity; shying away from doing what you know is right.
Leading with care	Understanding the unique qualities and needs of a team; providing a caring, safe environment to enable everyone to do their jobs effectively.	Making excuses for poor performance; avoiding responsibility for the well-being of colleagues in your team; failing to understand the impact of your own emotions or behaviour on colleagues; taking responsibility away from others.
Evaluating information	Seeking out varied information; using information to generate new ideas and make effective plans for improvement or change; making evidence-based decisions that respect different perspectives and meet the needs of all service users.	Failing to look beyond the obvious; collecting data without using it; thinking only about your own measures or experience; reluctance to look for better ways of doing things; ignoring problems by ignoring data; using research as a weapon.
Connecting our service	Understanding how health and social care services fit together and how different people, teams or organizations interconnect and interact.	Being rigid in your approach; thinking about only your part of the organization; believing only your view is the right one; thinking politics is a dirty word; failing to engage with other parts of the system; focusing solely on the depth of your area at the expense of the broader service.
Sharing the vision	Communicating a compelling and credible vision of the future in a way that makes it feel achievable and exciting.	Saying one thing and doing another; talking about the vision but not working to achieve it; being inconsistent in what you say; avoiding the difficult messages.
Engaging the team	Involving individuals and demonstrating that their contributions and ideas are valued and important for delivering outcomes and continuous	Building plans without consultation; autocratic leadership; failing to value diversity; springing ideas on others without discussion.

	improvements to the service.	
Holding to account	Agreeing clear performance goals and quality indicators; supporting individuals and teams to take responsibility for results; providing balanced feedback.	Setting unclear targets; tolerating mediocrity; making erratic and changeable demands; giving unbalanced feedback; making excuses for poor or variable performance; reluctance to change.
Developing capability	Building capability to enable people to meet future challenges; using a range of experiences as a vehicle for individual and organizational learning; acting as a role model for personal development.	Focusing on development for short-term task accomplishment; supporting only technical learning at the expense of other forms of growth and development; developing yourself mainly for your own benefit; developing only the 'best' people.
Influencing for results	Deciding how to have a positive impact on other people; building relationships to recognize other people's passions and concerns; using interpersonal and organizational understanding to persuade and build collaboration.	Being insular; pushing your agenda without regard to other views; only using one influencing style; being discourteous or dismissive.